

New York Times Coverage Follows Narrative of Israeli State Power

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The New York Times ran two very different stories recently related to Israel. An analysis of the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement titled "[Campus Debates on Israel Drive a Wedge Between Jews and Minorities](#)," portrays the nonviolent campaign to hold Israel accountable for its violations of international law as a cause of tensions between ethnic groups. Several days later, the [Gray Lady](#) printed "[Israel Says Hezbollah Positions Put Lebanese at Risk](#)," uncritically repeating Israeli propaganda justifying a future violent, illegal invasion that would likely kill thousands of civilians.

In the article on BDS, the Times pursues a biased preconceived narrative that BDS is sparking a conflict between ethnic groups. In reality, to the extent there is a conflict, it is between two different political groups – Zionists and anti-Zionists. It has nothing to do with one's race or religion, but with their political views on whether all people enjoy equal rights or not.

Writing in Salon, [David Palumbo-Liu](#) calls the piece "race-baiting." [Ali Abunimah](#) writes that Jewish students involved in the BDS movement were interviewed by the Times but "when their words didn't fit a preordained story, their voices were excluded altogether." Even the Times' Public Editor, [Margaret Sullivan](#), wrote that interview questions subjecting Jewish BDS supporters to a "Jewish litmus test" were "unprofessional and unacceptable."

A Palestinian student at UC Berkeley who spoke with Abunimah was asked questions by a Times reporter from her editor including: "To what extent is BDS used as a fig leaf for anti-Semitism?" It appears obvious that the angle of the story came before the reporting done to back it up.

By pursuing this particular angle, the Times is following the ideological position of the Israeli government, which claims BDS is an attack on Jews. This is a position explicitly stated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a speech last year during which he mentioned "BDS" [18 times](#): "Those who wear the BDS label should be treated exactly as we treat any anti-Semite or bigot."

The Times also states that college activists have "cast the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a powerful force's oppression of a displaced group." It is true that college activists have cast the conflict this way. So have the world's top scholars, human rights organizations, and international lawyers. Many have used stronger and more accurate language, casting it as the conquest and [slow-motion genocide](#) of an entire people.

In his 2014 [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the](#)

[Palestinian territories occupied since 1967](#), international law expert Richard Falk wrote of overwhelming evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including apartheid and ethnic cleansing.

“Through prolonged occupation, with practices and policies which appear to constitute apartheid and segregation, ongoing expansion of settlements, and continual construction of the wall arguably amounting to de facto annexation of parts of the occupied Palestinian territory, the denial by Israel of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people is evident,” Falk writes.

There is nearly seventy years worth of documented evidence from human rights organizations of [collective punishment](#); [torture and abuse of detainees](#); [unlawful killings](#); [a blockade by air, land and sea](#); [abuse of children](#); and innumerable other offenses. Leading Jewish Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, who had access to state archives and David Ben-Gurion’s personal diary, writes in [The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine](#) that Zionist leaders planned the “systematic and total expulsion [of Palestinians] from their homeland.”

The Times could also say college activists cast the problem of climate change as the accumulation of man-made greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere creating catastrophic impacts. This is true. It is also true that 98% of the world’s leading scientists cast the problem the same way. It cannot be reduced to the ideas of a few youths.

The Times says college officials are trying to determine how to draw a line between opposition to Israel’s policies and “hostility towards Jews.” They write that “opponents of divestment sometimes allude to the Holocaust.”

“What bothers me is the shocking amnesia of people who look at the situation of American Jews right now and say, ‘You’re privileged, you don’t have a right to complain about discrimination,’ ” a freshman named Rachel Roberts is quoted as saying. “To turn a blind eye to the sensitivities of someone’s cultural identity is to pretend that history didn’t happen.”

Norman Finkelstein, whose mother and father both survived the Warsaw Ghetto and Nazi concentration camps, describes this type of argument in [The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering](#) as “crass exploitation of Jewish martyrdom.” Finkelstein writes that he grows indignant about the exploitation of the Nazi genocide because “it has been used to justify criminal policies of the Israeli state and US support for these policies.”

This is exactly what Roberts is doing by invoking the “sensitivities” of her “cultural identity” to implicitly claim that they have anything to do with the legitimate criticisms the BDS campaign makes against Israeli state policies. The Times doesn’t bother to point out that there is no conceivable connection between divestment and the Holocaust. Instead they provide a platform for dishonest and cynical distractions from substantive debate.

Conflating criticism of Israeli policies with anti-Semitism is a well-established phenomenon on college campuses. This year alone, [Palestine Solidarity Legal Support](#) has documented 60 incidents of accusations of anti-Semitism and 24 incidents of accusations of support for terrorism that were based on nothing more than speech critical of Israeli policies.

“False accusations of anti-Semitism are being employed as a strategy to pressure campus

authorities to suppress speech that is critical of Israel,” said Maria LaHood of the Center for Constitutional Rights.

The intimidation of BDS supporters and false accusations against them produces a chilling effect severely damaging to participation in the democratic process and to academic freedom. This would be a story well worth exploring, but apparently not for the editors at the Times.

The Times article states that swastikas have been painted on the doors of Jewish fraternities. These are despicable, hateful actions to be sure. But the fact that a divestment resolution was taking place on campus no way implicates members of the movement. There is no evidence to suggest otherwise. The BDS campaign has been explicit and forceful in its rejection of racism in all forms.

At the end of the article, the writers find common ground between both sides: “One of the few things both sides seem to agree on is just how divisive the issue has been,” So was apartheid. So was slavery. It is divisive politically. This is very different than being divisive ethnically.

In the article “Israel Says Hezbollah Positions Put Lebanese at Risk”, Times reporter Isabel Kershner provides a platform for Israeli officials to rationalize in advance their criminal aggression that will lead to massive civilian casualties.

Since nonviolence is not an option for them, Israeli officials need to lay the groundwork to deflect any responsibility for the killing they plan to carry out. This P.R. strategy is a calculated response to the worldwide popular backlash after Israel’s slaughter of more than 2,100 Palestinians, including nearly 600 children, in Gaza last summer. The Times obliges with uncritical stenography of Israeli military propaganda, accepting the word of state power at face value.

“As Israel prepares for what it sees as an almost inevitable next battle with Hezbollah, the Shiite Lebanese organization that fought a monthlong war against Israel in 2006, Israeli military officials and experts are warning that the group has done more than significantly build up its firepower since then,”

Kershner writes.

What would be the reaction if after Hitler proclaimed Czechoslovakia “a dagger pointed at the heart of Germany” a German newspaper had run an article titled: “Hitler says Czechoslovakia Puts Civilians at Risk”? Even the most ideological partisans would recognize this as the legitimization of state propaganda.

Just because the Israeli military sees a war as inevitable doesn’t mean it actually is. Israeli military planners didn’t have to initiate war in 1967, 1982, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014 and they don’t have to today. It is a choice, not an inevitability.

Hezbollah itself was only formed after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon that killed more than 20,000 people, and the ensuing 18-year-long occupation of sovereign Lebanese territory. Had Israel not been an aggressive, rogue violator of international law in the first place, there would be no Lebanese resistance to Israeli military force.

It is a violation of international law to threaten or use force against another state. In 2006, Israel instigated an attack against Hezbollah and falsely claimed self-defense, as they had in 1967 when they bombed Egypt and lied about Egyptians bombing them first.

"I consider Israel's self-defence argument an abuse of terminology that is not applicable to the facts at hand and has no justification in international law," wrote [Victor Kattan](#) in July 2006.

At the time, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [Louise Arbour](#) said:

"The situation in the south of Lebanon is alarming. A large and steadily increasing number of persons have been forcibly displaced. The most basic human rights of the population are at risk or are being violated, including their rights to life, health and food."

Kershner sums up the outrageous argument Israel now makes nine years later:

"Effectively, the Israelis are warning that in the event of another conflict with Hezbollah, many Lebanese civilians will probably be killed, and that it should not be considered Israel's fault."

Kershner, whose [son serves in the Israeli army](#), follows this up with an unchallenged quote from an Israeli military official. She allows the Israeli military to claim it is not their fault that they intend to kill many civilians, without bothering to mention this would be a flagrant violation of international law and the laws of war.

Would the New York Times write an article in which it quotes Hezbollah saying that they see an attack on Israel as inevitable, and because the IDF places its headquarters in the middle of downtown Tel Aviv, they will be forced to kill many civilians and should not be blamed for it?

Yonatan Shapira, a Jewish Israeli who served as an Air Force pilot before refusing to fly in missions in the occupied Palestinian territories, told [Democracy Now](#) during the onslaught in Gaza last summer:

"You can see the headquarter of the Kirya [the Israeli Army] just few meters from the biggest hospital in Tel Aviv, Ichilov... Just next to it, you have the biggest tower in this side of Tel Aviv. It's the HaShalom Towers, the Peace Tower."

"Fascism and racism is now the biggest threat of the Jewish people in the Middle East,"

Shapira said.

"And I can just cry and shout and ask everyone that hear us now to join the BDS movement... to try to put enormous pressure on your leaders, wherever they are, that they, in turn, will help us here stop this massacre, stop this ongoing slaughter of innocent people."

Shapira's comments demonstrate the true motivations for – and necessity of – BDS. There is no wedge between Shapira and the many other Jewish solidarity activists, such as [Jewish Voice for Peace](#), over BDS. Any honest account of the BDS movement on college campuses and beyond would have to recognize its purely political nature. But to do so would require the Times to challenge the narrative of state power.

In both stories, the Times sticks comfortably to the ideological framework of Israeli authorities. The Israeli regime says BDS is a form of anti-Semitism; the Times uses that narrative to shape a story. The Israeli regime says they would be forced to attack a sovereign nation and kill civilians; the Times repeats their claim unchallenged without a single mention of international law. While the Times is comfortable challenging the narrative of college activists, they are apparently unwilling to do so for Israeli officials.

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